

to his methods⁵, quotes the text of Exodus 21. 14 as ‘Ventus urens ex Austro’⁶, and explains it allegorically: ‘id est, Spiritus Sanctus a Christotentationibus hujus mundi a sanctis expellens’.

Auster has many allegorical applications, but it is very common as a symbol of the Holy Spirit. It recurs constantly in expositions of *Canticles* iv. 16 – ‘Surge, aquilo, et veni, auster’ – id est, Recede, diabole, et veni Spiritus alme’, as St. Eucherius of Lyons puts it⁷. St. Gregory the Great makes the same point in *Moralia* Lib., XXXI cap. XLVI, (P.L. LXXVI, 623, 624) and in his *Super Cantica Canticorum Expositio* he expresses it compactly (P.L. LXXIX, 516):

Per Austrum vero, calidum scilicet ventum, Spiritus Sanctus figuratur. He gives the same explanation in commenting on *Ezechiel* (P.L. LXXVI, 799c).

Whether the historical wind was south as in the Greek, east as in the English versions (according to scholarly interpretation of the Hebrew which does not use compass-points) or not specified as in the Vulgate, accepted commentary would be likely to suggest *South* in the sort of mental atmosphere we have been postulating. It is true that Rabanus Maurus could come to the same conclusion using the Vulgate wording, but the currency of *Auster* in earlier Latin and *Notos* in Greek is a solid support for the MS text⁸.

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1. Notes in their editions to line 290.
2. See the *Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* (O.U.P., 1957), s.v. Bede and C. Plummer, *Bædæ Opera Historica* (O.U.P., 1896), Introd. Pt I, 5, 6 and 13.
3. Ambrose and Victorinus are quoted by Bede; Plummer, op. cit. 13. On Cyprianus and Anglo-Saxon authors, see p. VIII of the C.S.E.L. edition of his poems.
4. Irving, op. cit., p. 14.
5. M. L. W. Laistner, *A Hand-List of Bede MSS.* (Cornell U.S., 1943), p. 16.
6. The text is considered to be a conflation of the Vulgate and the *Vetus Latina*, *ventus urens* being an explanation by Jerome of *auster*.
7. Migne P.L. L col. 741.
8. For information about the Latin text, pseudo-Bede, and the occurrence of *Auster*, we are deeply indebted to three Biblical scholars – the Rev. Kenneth Grayston of Bristol, Professor Kilpatrick of Oxford, and above all to Dom B. Fischer O.S.B. of the *Vetus Italia* Institut, who have most generously given us the benefit of their expert knowledge.

THE LITERARY SERIOUSNESS OF JOHN SKELTON'S ‘SPEKE, PARROT’

Skelton's *Speke, Parrot* is the most difficult of his poems to interpret, and this for a reason quite apart from the obscurities of topical reference which it contains. The fact is that, despite the amount of brilliant work which has gone into the explication of the text, there is still no general agreement about the literary value of the poem, or indeed about its right to be judged as literature at all. Is it simply a brilliant farrago of discon-

nected snippets or is it a work with a recognisable literary structure? Clearly this is an important question, the answer to which will determine the degree of seriousness with which the reader is prepared to approach the satire. The purpose of this article is to develop three points which support the view that *Speke, Parrot*, in spite of its obscurities and apparently arbitrary development, is a poem which should be read and judged as a serious literary achievement.

Although there are, unfortunately, no contemporary references to help us in understanding how an early sixteenth century reader would have approached *Speke, Parrot*, there are many clues in the poem itself. Skelton is careful to point frequently, behind the difficulties and obscurities of the verse, to its significance. Some people, he says, think that Parrot's speech is scrappy and incoherent, but "lewldlye ar they lettyrd" that his "lernyng lackys", and a clue to the type of learning needed is given in the following lines:

The myrroure that I tote in, *quasi diaphanum*,
 Vel *quasi speculum*, in *aenigmate*,
 Elencticum . . .

(ll. 195ff)¹

where the ideas, "mirror . . . riddle . . . elenchus" give the clue to the difficulties of the poem. No single method of interpretation is possible. At times the parrot holds the mirror up and the satire is clear to see; sometimes he speaks in enigmas, and sometimes he argues his case to its conclusion.

In using the enigmatic style when he came to write *Speke, Parrot* Skelton was doing something which he had not done before, but something which he could be reasonably sure that his audience would understand. A reader who was brought up in the atmosphere that produced that great debunking ceremony, the Feast of Fools, which encouraged the productions of the *Sociétés Joyeux*, and which delighted in household fools, both sage and natural, was well equipped to cope with a poem like *Speke, Parrot*. The paradox of meaningful folly was one of the most widespread ideas of the period, and fundamental to Skelton's poem. But the immediate literary antecedents of *Speke, Parrot* are also accessible, and with their help it is possible to gain something of the literary standpoint of Skelton's first readers. During the fifteenth century there had already been a small body of writing which made use of nonsense tags and riddling passages to produce a satirical effect. At its very simplest this device can be seen in poems like Lydgate's *Ryght as a Rammes Horn* or *So as the Crabbe Goth Forward*:² each stanza in these poems consists of a list of desirable moral qualities followed by a refrain which comments ironically upon the rarity of such attributes:

1. Line references are to the text of *Speke, Parrot* printed by Alexander Dyce in *The Poetical Works of John Skelton* (London, 1843).

2. *The Minor Poems of John Lydgate* ed. H. N. MacCracken, p. 466.

Pariuree in England and Fraunce
 Is fledde byyonde Mount Godard,
 Iuroures with Trough haue allyaunce –
 So as þe crabbe gooþe forwarde.

The irony depends upon simple repetition for its strength, and the poem develops a sort of sledge-hammer effectiveness. *The Cok hath lowe shoone*,¹ also by Lydgate, is of a very similar type: each stanza consists of more or less epigrammatic statements ending with the refrain:

“Alle goo we stille, the Cok hath lowe shoone”

... which may be interpreted as, “but it would be best not to go into that now.” Skelton produces a similar effect of conspiratorial caution, when he says, after sharp satirical thrusts, “*Ticez vous, Parrot, tenez vous coye*” or “Ware the cat, Parrot, ware the false cat!” The first stanza of *The Cok hath lowe shoone* contains a line which might almost be taken as a motto to this type of satirical verse:

“Speche is but fooly and sugyrd elloquence”

... It is the fiction that speech is nothing more than “fooly and sugyrd elloquence” which provides the basis of riddling and nonsense verses. Under a cloak of empty word-spinning the critical thrust can be safely made.

Rather more subtle than Lydgate's verses is the riddling type of poem where characters are referred to emblematically. In a poem *On King Richard's Ministers*² there is the following stanza:

Ther is a busch that is forgrowe;
 Crop hit welle, and hold hit lowe,
 or elles hit wolle be wilde.
 The long gras that is so grene,
 Hit must be mowe, and raked clene;
 forgrowen hit bath the felde.

Here the poet has simply but effectively managed to allegorise an attack upon Sir John Bushey and Sir Henry Greene, and we remember that Skelton claimed the right to a similar method:

metaphora, allegoria with all,
 Shall be his protectyon, his pauys and his wall.
 (ll. 207f.)

A similar example from the fifteenth century is to be found in *The Twelve Letters that shall save Mery England*³ where the poet cryptically refers by means of initials and badges to four men whom he wishes to honour. Wright prints a particularly interesting specimen of the same type under the title *On the Popular Discontent at the Disasters in France*⁴. He dates the poem *circa* 1449. In it the leaders of the country are designated by their badges, and the poem is especially valuable from the present point

1. *The Minor Poems of John Lydgate* ed. H. N. MacCracken, p. 813.

2. *Political Poems and Songs* ed. Thomas Wright. Two Vols., (London, 1859), vol. I, p. 363.

3. *Political, Religious and Love Poems* ed. F. J. Furnivall (London, 1866), p. 1.

4. *op. cit.* II, 221.

"*Le tonsan de Jason*" is a reference to the Order of Jason's Fleece, and emblematically to the head of the Order, Charles V, with whom England had covertly sided at the Calais conference. It is the last line with which I am concerned. Lyacon is presumably a variant of "Lycaon", the king who offered Zeus human flesh at a feast, and was turned into a wolf as a punishment. Puns on Wolsey's name are a commonplace in the period and in Skelton's work, and there seems no doubt that one is intended here. A likely implication – and this is the probable point of the reference – is to be found in the fact that it was Zeus's wrath at his deception by Lycaon which caused him to bring about a great flood, the classical inundation. The last section of *Speke, Parrot* contains a curious refrain, namely that the world is now more evil than it has been "syns Dewcalyons flodde", an idea which seems to refer back to the line under discussion. The thought that it was a "wolf" that caused the classical catastrophe, just as it is another "wolf" that is mishandling present affairs is one with which Skelton's agile mind would have delighted to play, and the reference can scarcely be accidental.

Here and in many similar passages we find Skelton making full use of a minor literary tradition, and writing in a manner which would have been entirely familiar to his first readers. This in itself does a good deal towards rescuing him from the charge of being unliterary, of being concerned with obscure topicalities to the point of literary chaos. The obscure allusiveness of the work, in other words, is not idiosyncratic; it is part of a recognised convention. But whereas the fifteenth century examples of the convention that I have cited have some degree of unity imposed by their very brevity *Speke, Parrot* is long enough to need a unifying principle apart from hatred of Wolsey, and this Skelton provides.

He does so first of all through the character of Parrot himself. The bird's place in the satire is not easy to define and different critics have cast him in different roles. Nelson, for example, considers that the bird stands simply for the poet, whereas Edwards has put forward a well substantiated theory that he is intended to be "the vehicle of religious truth . . . the poet in his most serious guise: the revealer of God's word."¹ At times, there can be no doubt, Parrot is to be thought of as the utterer of oracular truth. He comes from Paradise, "that place of pleasure perdurable", Melpomene burnishes his beak, his flesh does not rot. Just as clearly he often voices Skelton's own mundane opinions. But there is a further aspect of his character which needs to be given special emphasis.

In the fourth stanza of the poem Parrot lists his linguistic attainments:

Parrot can mute and cry
 In Lattyn, in Ebrew, Araby, and Caldey;
 In Greke tong Parrot can bothe speke and say . . .
 (ll. 26ff)

1. William Nelson *John Skelton, Laureate* (New York, 1939) and H. L. R. Edwards *Skelton* (London, 1949).

This selection of languages was not chosen entirely hap-hazardly. They were, in fact, the very languages which humanists wished to be studied in order that the earliest Biblical manuscripts might be satisfactorily studied and collated. As early as the thirteenth century Roger Bacon had written grammars of Greek, Hebrew and Arabic and testified to the importance of "Caldey". By the sixteenth century Rabelais was able to boast, in the letter from Gargantua to Pantagruel, that "now the mindes of men are qualified with all manner of discipline, and the old sciences revived, which for many ages were extinct: now it is, that the learned languages are to their pristine purity restored, viz. Greek (without which a man may be ashamed to account himself a scholar,) Hebrew, Arabick, Chaldæan and Latine".¹ The four languages (together with Latin) are thought of as containing the quintessence of the new learning. In making Parrot a master of these languages Skelton's point is that, despite the mediaeval and orthodox viewpoint of much of the satire in *Speke, Parrot*, the bird himself is the complete humanist in education and attainments. In this respect he is very far from being the representative of Skelton. The poet owed his preferment at the Court of Henry VII to his skill in Latin, and throughout his life he regarded the study of other classical languages with the disapproval of a middle-aged man faced by an unwelcome innovation.

Parrot's knowledge of "Ebrew, Araby, and Caldey" was, in fact, a splendid piece of irony on Skelton's part. The subject of Parrot's satire is the change for the worse which has taken place in political and economic life under the evil influence of that new man, the outrageously successful *parvenu*, Thomas Wolsey. Yet Parrot himself is a perfect modernist in his education. "Here", Skelton seems to say, "is a genuine new man. He knows everything that should be known; he is thoroughly up-to-date, yet see how old-fashioned his wisdom really is." By one brilliant stroke Skelton forestalls the suggestion that the bird is merely a mouthpiece for the author's dogmatic conservatism. On the contrary he is entirely liberal in his attainments. And this twist adds immensely to the ironic force of the attack on Greek studies which is often regarded as intrusive and indeed superfluous to the main line of the poem's development. Wolsey was, of course, one of the most influential supporters of Greek studies and of Continental influences upon English scholarship. That he should be attacked for these activities by, ostensibly, a proficient in the new learning was far more damaging than any attack from outside could have been.

The obscurity of the poem, then, is accounted for by its position at the head of a minor literary tradition, and it is given tonal unity through the versatile and often ironical character of Parrot himself. Unity of develop-

1. *Gargantua and Pantagruel* translated into English by Sir Thomas Urquhart and Peter le Motteux and edited by W. E. Henley. Tudor Translations XXIV, Two vols., (London, 1900), I, 230.

ment – linear as distinct from atmospheric unity – is provided by the momentum of the shift from general to particular satire, the shift from satire of the times, through satire of political acts, to an uncompromising attack upon Wolsey himself. To put the matter in image form one could say that the structure of the poem is pyramidal, broadly based at the beginning, sharply pointed at its conclusion. It opens, after the introduction of Parrot, on a note of impeccable rectitude and calm:

Cryst saue Kyng Henry the viii., our royall kyng,
The red rose in honour to florysh and sprynge!
(ll. 36f)

At first the moral criticism is conventional and aphoristic, entirely inoffensive:

Moderata iuvant, but toto doth excede;
Dyscreesson is moder of noble vertues all . . .
(ll. 52f)

From this point onwards for the next ten stanzas Skelton has two predominant aims: first to build up a general pattern of satiric lament, and secondly to produce an atmosphere of half-significant innuendo which will lead to a feeling of rapport, almost conspiracy, between author and audience, a sense of intimacy and knowingness in which any hint, however obscure, will be taken up. The mood of satiric lament is produced largely through the passages of Biblical reference contained in stanzas ix–x and xvii–ixx. The first two lines of stanza xvii are typical of Skelton's method:

Ulula, Esebon, for Ieromy doth wepe!
Sion is in sadnes, Rachell ruly doth loke . . .
(ll. 115f)

lines in which the technique is almost entirely associative, and in which the emotional power evoked is extraordinarily strong. The method of the lines is simply to bring together Biblical ideas with tragic associations. The Lamentations of Jeremiah are remembered, and a specific reference made to his prophecy of the capture of Heshbon by the Philistines. The image of Rachel, one of the most poignant in the Old Testament, is used, and the evocation of Jeremiah's phrases, "A voice is heard in Ramah, lamentation and bitter weeping, Rachel weeping for her children", introduces an elegaic note which is perfectly in accord with Skelton's intentions at this point. His aim is simply to induce a feeling of desolation and impending doom.

Into this atmosphere remarks are injected which obscurely suggest a more immediate and political application:

But reason and wyt wantyth theyr prouyncyall
When wylfulnes is vycar generall . . .
(ll. 55f)

– a legitimate aphorism which is also, almost certainly, a thrust at Wolsey. The first two stanzas of Biblical echoes are immediately followed by a reference which has been shown to point to Wolsey:¹

Howst the, *lyuer god van hemrik, ic seg*;
In Popering grew peres, whan Parrot was an eg . . .
(ll. 71f)

There is no criticism of Wolsey's policy here, but the concealed reference directs attention to the Cardinal and suggests more than it states. A feeling develops, inexplicit but strong, that it is Wolsey who is the cause of the poet's lamentation. At the same time a sense of daring and danger is introduced, as I mentioned in another connection, by the use of phrases like, *Ticez vous, Parrot*" or "Ware the cat, Parrot". At this stage of *Speke, Parrot*, as often in a modern revue, the audience is stimulated to look for hidden meanings, and is left to draw its own knowing conclusions about the object of an attack. And in an atmosphere of this kind an apparently aimless line like:

The iebet of Baldock was made for Jack leg
(l. 75)

becomes meaningful: there is no clear logical connection with previous passages, but the idea of a gallows is appropriate and welcome at a particular point in a political satire. It is the poetic equivalent of the revolutionary *à la lanterne*.

This, then, is the poetic method of the first twenty-one stanzas of *Speke, Parrot*: satiric lament, oblique reference to Wolsey, and phrases intended to spur the reader towards daring political interpretations. At this point in the poem Skelton (granted that his ultimate aim was to damage Wolsey's reputation as much as possible) needed to define his attack more clearly. On the other hand he had hardly reached a point which made a direct attack on Wolsey feasible because the break between innuendo and direct attack would have been too sudden. He meets the problem by moving into a digression on Tudor education which is often considered to be intrusive, but which is, in fact, inserted at the most appropriate point in the poem. Skelton's subject here – an attack on Greek studies – admits direct statement just at the point where further obscurity might have become wearisome, and at the same time it carries forward the general argument of the poem since Wolsey was himself one of the most enthusiastic supporters of Greek studies in England. Both Skelton's personal antipathy to the New Learning and the needs of his poem made a criticism of "our Greekis" appropriate in this place.

Soon after this passage the first section of *Speke, Parrot* ends, and the satirical note is not taken up again until *Lenuoy primere*. The way to direct attack has now been opened, and in *Lenuoy primere* the satire is more particular and the disguise less heavy. In *Secunde Lenuoy* the attack is made almost without disguise:

1. See Edwards *op. cit.* pp. 187f. In August 1521 Wolsey had been in Brugges and the Flemish oath, together with the mention of Poperinghe is thought to hint at this fact.

With porpose and graundePOSE he may fede hym fatte,
 Thowghe he pampyr not hys paunche with the grete seall . . .
 (ll. 309ff)

a neat double reference, on the one hand to Wolsey's political arrogance (he had taken the Great Seal with him to Calais and thus interrupted all official business), and on the other to his love of pleasure.

In the next section of the poem, *Le dereyn Lenveoy*, we find the first passage of open personal abuse:

To bryng all the see into a cheryston pytte,
 To nombyr all the sterrys in the fyrmament,
 To rule ix realmes by one mannes wytte,
 To such thynges ympossybyll reason cannot consente:
 Muche money, men sey, there madly he hathe spente:
 Parrot, ye may prate thys vndyr protestacion,
 Was neuyr suche a senatour syn Crystes incarnation . . .
 (ll. 331ff)

The movement from satire of the times, through satire of political acts, to criticism of personality is thus complete, and the way is now clear for the composite complaint with which the poem ends.

After *Lenvoy royall*, which deals with the method of the poem, Parrot is urged by Galathea to speak of "frantycknes and folysshnes whyche ys the grett state", and finally, with no attempt at disguise at all, Parrot gives a picture of Wolsey:

He tryhumfythe, he trumpythe, he turnythe all vp and downe,
 With, skyregalyard, prowde palyard, vaunteperler, ye prate!
 Hys woluyes hede, wanne, bloo as lede, gapythe ouer the crowne:
 Hyt ys to fere leste he wolde were the garland on hys pate,
 Peregall with all prynces farre passyng hys estate . . .
 (ll. 426ff)

The portrait is so convincing, the invective so skilful and penetrating, that it is easy to forget the stages of preparation which have gone to make this attack effective. The pyramidal structure is now complete.

This analysis of three facets of a very complex poem seems to me to show one thing quite clearly, namely that Skelton was writing with a self-conscious sense of literary purpose during the composition of *Speke, Parrot*, and that its excellencies were by no means accidentally achieved. He was utilizing and developing a minor literary tradition, and using it with a degree of subtlety and with an awareness of its potentialities that must have been intentional. He developed, in the character of Parrot, a satiric vehicle with great ironic power. And finally he very carefully controlled the development of the poem so that the momentum of the attack on Wolsey constantly increased, and issued, in the last section, in a relentless direct assault. *Speke, Parrot* should be judged, therefore, as a serious literary achievement and not, as so often happens, as a fortuitous display of literary fireworks.